



# The Iran Deal a Year On: Assessing Iranian Ambitions

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## A YEAR ON, EVERYTHING IS WORSE

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Rafael Bardaji

One year ago, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the so-called ‘nuclear deal’, was signed in Vienna.

Opponents of the deal, including prominent voices associated with the organisations collaborating on this publication, argued then that no deal would be better than a bad deal, and opposed the JCPOA on account of a considered conviction that it would not stop Iran's nuclear ambitions, that it would boost Iran's sponsorship of terrorism, and that it would embolden Iranian involvement in regional conflicts, creating an ever more dangerous situation in the Middle East that could eventually affect the security of all nations.

The P5+1, guided by the Obama Administration, asserted with considerable force that the deal would monitor the cancellation of Iranian nuclear activities, would guarantee intrusive inspections in all Iranian facilities, would stop Iranian ballistic missile development, and would strengthen ‘moderate’ Iranian politicians, led by President Hassan Rouhani.

Yet Iran's behavior since then has confirmed that the caution opponents of the deal urges was entirely justified. The Obama Administration's strategy to normalise Iran's international relations has failed: Iran has not become a regular nation-state in the international community, has breached the JCPOA and associated agreements, and has neither changed its course internationally nor made any significant steps towards easing repression domestically.

It is worth stating again that Iran is the principal sponsor of terrorism in the world - something even the United States' own Department of State has been pointing out since 2013. Iranian forces, in particular the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), are still involved in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as an integral part of the Iranian government's destabilising agenda. The violation of human rights within Iran has not ceased and the hopes for a moderation of the regime are fading fast. Iran continues to develop its ballistic missile program and top Iranian leaders continue to declare openly its desire to wipe Israel off the map. All these themes will be explored in more depth in the pages that follow. None of them give hope that the deal is working.

Iranian breaches of the letter and spirit of the JCPOA have been a concern since the very beginning. In October 2015, only four months after signing the deal, Iran tested new ballistic missiles, in defiance of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which adopted the JCPOA. Some nuclear facilities, like Parchin, are still beyond the reach of inspectors, and according to the IAEA Iran has accumulated more heavy water than the JCPOA allows. Last July, on Quds Day, Iran's annual hate-fest against Israel held since the triumph of the Islamic revolution in 1979, an angry crowd chanted once again "Death to Israel" and "Death to America".

If Iran behaves in this manner during the first year of the JCPOA what can we expect by 2030, when the agreement expires?

The failure of the JCPOA is the result of a bad bet. The Obama Administration designed a nuclear deal that was supposed to suspend Iran's nuclear program for 15 years while encouraging changes in the current Iranian regime by empowering political moderates. Neither of those goals has been achieved. Moreover, the U.S. government, and its allies in this strategy, have failed to hold Iran accountable for its breaches of the JCPOA, and indeed in some cases appear as enablers in the hope of keeping this bad deal going.

To make matters worse, Iran is filling the power vacuum created by the precipitous American withdrawal from the Middle East, becoming a major regional actor - seeding instability and conflict wherever its influence appears. Meanwhile, Iran awaits a commercial honeymoon with the West thanks to the lifting of economic sanctions and arms embargoes. Although this boon has been delayed because of the mismanagement that the IRGC's control of the economy brings, the corrupt networks surrounding the Supreme Leader, and the lack of legal security for Western investors, if a massive influx of foreign trade and currency does start to flow, Iran could well satisfy its ambition become the hegemonic power in the Middle East.

A year ago, it was possible to argue that a better deal with Iran could have been reached. Today, it is a certainty that the only way to end, once for all, the fear of a nuclear-armed Iran is either regime change, or at minimum an extreme turnabout in the outlook of the current regime, neither of which will occur under the dynamics set in place by the JCPOA. This bad deal has not changed Iran. Quite the reverse: it has increased Iran's power and its expansionist activities. One year after the nuclear deal, far from being better, the resulting situation is worse. Worse for international security, worse for nuclear non-proliferation, worse for regional stability, and above all worse for the people of Iran themselves. They - and we - deserve a better, more promising path forward, the first step to which must be to take stock realistically. The essays that follow will hopefully serve as one small step in that direction.

**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE JCPOA:  
ONE YEAR ON**

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**Emily B. Landau**

Observers of the Iran deal will note that since the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) ‘Implementation Day’ in mid-January 2016, two International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports have been released that appear to offer a somewhat rosy view of Iran’s behaviour, concluding that Iran has so far complied with the terms of the nuclear deal. Iran shipped out most of its stockpile of low enriched uranium (LEU), removed about two thirds of its centrifuges, placing them in IAEA-monitored storage, and poured concrete into the core of the heavy-water reactor at Arak. Yet, as ever with the current regime in Tehran, all is not as it seems. Several crucial problems can be observed over the past year that might call into question that simple conclusion of compliance.

First, the IAEA reports purportedly offering a clean bill of health so far were themselves concerning. The level of detail contained in the two reports released since ‘Implementation Day’ is a far cry from what had been the norm for the reports on Iran’s nuclear program that were released every three months in the years preceding conclusion of the deal. The information and data that are missing in these new reports undermine any ability to independently assess the degree to which Iran is complying with the terms of the deal. The Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) published an important article in late May in which they analysed the second IAEA report on Iran, and listed some key questions that remain unanswered.<sup>1</sup> These include the specific size of the LEU stockpile that remains in Iran as well as its forms and locations; the number of centrifuges that are enriching uranium at Natanz; whether all the required centrifuges have been removed from Fordow; the status of turning Fordow into a research centre; the inventory of uranium enriched to 20 percent; and the status of the heavy water that is being temporarily stored in Oman – such as related questions of ownership, for example. There is also no information provided on Iran’s Research and Development (R&D) activities regarding advanced centrifuges.

One concern regarding the lack of detail in these reports is that issues are possibly being discussed in private, and perhaps small violations by Iran are being cleared up quietly or brushed aside by the P5+1. One violation that has already come to light concerns the fact that Iran had produced heavy water in excess of the limit set by the JCPOA, and subsequent media reports indicated U.S. intent to purchase 32 tons of this excess heavy water, to the tune of \$8.6 million. There are dual problematic messages to Iran here: not only are the P5+1 not raising a red flag in the face of this violation, but the U.S. will actually enable Iran to profit from the violation by buying this excess heavy water. Moreover, there is an implicit message that the U.S. might be willing to continue with this arrangement in the future, creating a serious hazard in the future dynamics of implementation of the deal.

An even more significant violation may have occurred with regard to the procurement channel set forth in the JCPOA. A disturbing report by Germany’s domestic intelligence agency revealed in late June that the agency detected 141 attempts by Iran in 2015 to illegally obtain missile and nuclear technology in Germany (as compared to 83 attempts in 2014). Ninety of the incidents in 2015 are described as illegal attempts to acquire technology that could be used for the development of nuclear weapons or their delivery systems.<sup>2</sup> This indicates that Iran continues, and is in fact increasing its attempts to illicitly acquire materials to further enhance its nuclear program. Whether and how the P5+1 react to this information will be a crucial test of their political will to hold Iran to its JCPOA commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> See Albright, D., Kelleher-Vergantini, S., and Stricker, A., ‘IAEA’s Second JCPOA Report: Key Information Still Missing’, *ISIS Report*, 31 May 2016, available at: [http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/Second\\_JCPOA\\_Post-Implementation\\_Day\\_Report\\_May\\_31\\_2016\\_Final.pdf](http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/Second_JCPOA_Post-Implementation_Day_Report_May_31_2016_Final.pdf), last visited: 12 July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Garaev, P., ‘Iran still trying to acquire materials for nuclear program, Germany warns’, *i24 News*, 7 July 2016, available at: <http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/119127-160707-iran-still-trying-to-acquire-materials-for-nuclear-program-germany-warns>, last visited: 12 July 2016.

Beyond these specific concerns, a thorough assessment of the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal should not only focus on how well Iran has met the different nuclear provisions; rather, it must assess Iranian compliance in a broader context. Thus, the degree to which Iran has upheld the provisions of the JCPOA must be evaluated against the backdrop of what the deal actually requires of Iran, as well as what Iran's goals were vis-à-vis the deal. With regard to the former, it is essential to keep in mind that Iran agreed to only minimal nuclear concessions – steps that will no doubt delay somewhat its ability to rush towards nuclear weapons development, but that - crucially - at the same time have enabled Iran to maintain its breakout capability. Thus, having made sure in advance not to agree to dismantlement measures that would have seriously crippled its nuclear program, Iran has less of a problem with compliance. Moreover, what brought Iran to the table in 2013 was its need to secure relief from biting sanctions, and Iran was well aware that the minimal nuclear concessions it did agree to were a necessary prerequisite for lifting these sanctions. Hence, ‘minimal nuclear concessions in exchange for maximum sanctions relief’ was the formula that guided Iran in its negotiations with the P5+1 over a comprehensive nuclear deal.

Worse, not only did Iran ensure that the concessions it agreed to would not undermine its breakout capability, it actually made some important gains with the deal, the significance of which will become more pronounced in the long term. The first of these gains is the legitimisation accorded by the deal to Iran's uranium enrichment activities. While a temporary cap of 300 kg was placed on Iran's stockpile of LEU, Iran continues to enrich uranium. A major concession that the P5+1 made to Iran from the start was to drop the demand for the dismantlement of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, settling instead for the much more limited goal of lengthening Iran's breakout time from 2-3 months to a year. The long-term implications of this legitimisation of Iran's threshold status – which includes allowing Iran to work on R&D on an entire range of advanced generations of centrifuges – are critical. In 10-15 years when all significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program are lifted, Iran will be well positioned to significantly enhance its nuclear program, and breakout time will be reduced to a matter of weeks. President Obama admitted as much in his interview with NPR in April 2015,<sup>3</sup> after which the U.S. State Department – apparently realising the implications of this admission – made a clumsy attempt to blur the effect of the interview by claiming that what the President had said had been misunderstood.

An additional grave concern is that the deal also enabled Iran to escape any consequences for the conclusions of the final IAEA report of December 2015 on the possible military dimensions (PMD) of its program – namely, its past work on a military nuclear capability. That report determined that Iran worked in a coordinated manner on a military nuclear program until 2003 and in a less coordinated manner until at least 2009. The curious decision to simply close the PMD file following that damning report will have adverse implications in a number of respects, including for conducting inspections at suspicious facilities in Iran down the road. By setting aside the report, the P5+1 have inadvertently enabled Iran to continue to cling to its narrative of nuclear innocence, according to which it never worked on a military nuclear program at all.

In June, the *Wall Street Journal* noted that U.S. officials concluded that man-made uranium particles found at Parchin last summer were connected to a nuclear weapons program,<sup>4</sup> corroborating suspicions that have for years focused on the military-related nuclear activities that were carried out at that facility. But the terms of the side deal between the IAEA and Iran that accompanied the JCPOA are such that the IAEA was allowed only the one chance to collect soil samples from Parchin, and is now barred from

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<sup>3</sup> President Obama said that in year 13, 14, 15, Iran's breakout time (using advanced centrifuges) will go down to zero. ‘Transcript: President Obama's Full NPR Interview On Iran Nuclear Deal’, *NPR*, 7 April 2015, available at: <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/07/397933577/transcript-president-obamas-full-npr-interview-on-iran-nuclear-deal>, last visited: 12 July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Solomon, J. ‘Uranium Provides New Clue on Iran's Past Nuclear Arms Work’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 June 2016, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/uranium-provides-new-clue-on-irans-past-nuclear-arms-work-1466380760>, last visited: 12 July 2016.

conducting additional inspections. Former Deputy Director of the IAEA Olli Heinonen argues that in light of the findings, the IAEA has an obligation to do a follow-up investigation, but he has found no evidence in any of the IAEA reports since last summer that the agency has sought clarification of possible undeclared nuclear activities in Iran.<sup>5</sup>

In this context it is worth recalling that the text of the JCPOA contains lengthy explanations setting forth the procedure for the IAEA to request and carry out an inspection at a non-nuclear site where Iran is suspected of carrying out weapons-related activities. But for all the detailed provisions, it lacks the specifics for the IAEA to gain timely access to a suspect military site. Moreover, Iran's leaders have made it very clear that they will never allow entry into a military site, and an Iranian threat to leave the deal in the face of such a demand will most likely deter the P5+1 from trying to force Iran's hand.

Finally, Iran also ensured that its work on a delivery mechanism for a future nuclear warhead continues unhindered. Iran was adamant from the start about not discussing its ballistic missile program, insisting that ballistic missiles are 'non nuclear'. The P5+1 unwisely conceded to this dangerous demand, and ballistic missiles were left outside the purview of the nuclear negotiation. Alas, since the deal was announced last July, Iran has conducted several tests of long-range precision-guided ballistic missiles that can carry a nuclear payload, with the initial tests (October and November 2015) constituting a clear violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1929, still in force at the time. Some of these missiles had written on them – in Hebrew – the intent to destroy Israel. The fact that Iran continues this work on a delivery mechanism unhindered is another indication that its breakout capability remains intact.

In conclusion, while Iran has on the surface appeared to comply with the terms of the JCPOA, significant questions have arisen with regard to some of its activities, both within the framework of the deal and with regard to possible undeclared nuclear activities and its missile program. The evidence contained in the German report is certainly cause for concern and continued follow-up. Moreover, even if there has so far been fairly good compliance on Iran's part, it is important to remember the broader context – both the fact that its concessions were minimal from the start, and that it had to comply in order to get the sanctions relief it was after. But evidence of Iran testing the waters and 'pushing the envelop' as it were, do not bode well for the long term. Iran's broader regional profile only helps to drive home that Iran's goal is not to turn over a new leaf and begin cooperating with the international community. As such, extreme vigilance coupled with the necessary political will to confront Iran on its violations and misbehaviour is essential in the coming years.

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<sup>5</sup> Heinonen, O., 'Uranium Particles at Parchin Indicate Possible Undeclared Iranian Nuclear Activities', *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 1 July 2016, available at: <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/olli-heinonen1-uranium-particles-at-parchin-indicate-possible-undeclared-iranian-nuclear-a/>, last visited: 12 July 2016.

**PATTERNS OF SUBVERSION: IRANIAN  
POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST REGION**

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**Jonathan Spyer**

## Introduction

Iran is currently actively supporting proxies in major conflicts in the following areas: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. In addition, there is evidence that Iranian agencies are active among Shia populations – as yet without major effect – in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has produced no major impact on the pattern of Iranian regional commitments. However, the release of tens of billions of dollars in sanctions relief has enabled the Iranians, who were in some danger of overstretch, to now freely commit to increasing support for their various allies and proxies in the Middle East.

## Iranian Aims

Iran's strategic goal is to emerge as the dominant power in the Middle East and, eventually, the entire Islamic world. It seeks to roll back US influence in the region and to work towards Israel's destruction.

At a conference on 'Iran, Nationalism, History, and Culture' in Tehran in March 2015, Ali Younesi, a senior adviser on intelligence matters to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, outlined a clear vision for Iranian regional hegemony. Younesi described Iran's role as 'protecting the interests of all the people in the region – because they are all Iran's people ... We must try to once again spread the banner of Islamic-Iranian unity and peace in the region. Iran must bear this responsibility, as it did in the past.' He noted Iran's past as an empire, and spoke of a 'greater Iran' which stretched from the borders of China to the Persian Gulf.<sup>6</sup>

Younesi's statements are not, of course, a failsafe guide to policy; rather the adviser's much noted speech is a fair summary of the wide ambitions of Iran.

In practice, Iranian resources appear to be directed to realising this vision in two specific areas: The establishment of a contiguous line of pro-Iranian entities between the Iraq-Iran border and the Mediterranean Sea; and extending Iranian influence to the Arabic-speaking side of the Persian Gulf, while subverting the interests of Saudi Arabia in this area.

The first goal has a number of motivating forces behind it. Firstly, there is an obvious strategic interest in reaching access to the Mediterranean, which has been a feature of Iranian and Persian state policy from antiquity. Secondly, reaching Lebanon gives Tehran an entry point into the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Iranians have invested heavily for over 30 years in their client Hezbollah in Lebanon. As non-Arabs and non-Sunni Muslims, the Iranians suffer from a 'legitimacy gap' in the mainly Sunni Muslim Arab Middle East. They seek to close this gap through commitment to the destruction of Israel, and in practical terms through the sponsorship of organisations engaged in war against the Jewish state. Access to Israel's borders is essential for this.

Iran's determined defence of the Assad regime in Syria should be seen in light of both these ambitions. Were Syria to fall, the hope of a chain of pro-Iranian states to the Mediterranean would be gone. So would the land link to Hezbollah and the conflict with Israel. A post-Assad Syria would be controlled by the Sunni Arab majority, who would be unlikely to quickly forgive Hezbollah and Iran's support for the regime. Hence the Iranians have no other option but to double down on their support for the regime.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Morrell, 'Iran's Grand Strategy is to Become a Regional Powerhouse,' Washington Post, April 3, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

In addition, Iran has an interest in a weak or subordinated Iraq. Iran fought a bloody war against Iraq in the 1980s, which forms a core formative experience for the regime. To avoid any possible recurrence, Iran has an interest in ensuring a non-hostile Iraq through sponsorship of friendly political players in that country.

With regard to the Gulf, Tehran sees Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council as rivals for power. Tehran lacks the conventional ground and air forces for projection of power beyond its borders. It seeks to overcome this disadvantage through the development of its ballistic missile programme, and through its efforts in asymmetric conflict.

While the Iranians may hope eventually to isolate Saudi Arabia and cause the Gulf states to abandon their links with the US and to instead come under Iranian protection, this moment is far away in terms of the current balance of power because of Iran's limited military capacities. At present, therefore, the Iranians aim to frustrate any Gulf or US ability to carry out operations in the Gulf or into Iranian territory through the building of a deterrent capacity.

The Iranian practice of harassing international shipping in the Straits of Hormuz and the investment in small boats, coastal defence and UAVs reflects this goal. Because of their limited conventional capabilities, the effective use of proxy warfare has high importance to the Iranians.

Overall, Iran's strategic goal can be summed up in the desire to ultimately become the regional hegemon. In the short term its core goals include maintaining domination of the space between the Iran-Iraq border and the Mediterranean, as well as deterring the US and intimidating the Gulf states.

These goals place Iran at loggerheads with the status quo states in the region, most importantly Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry, combined with the collapse of a number of regional states and the growing importance of sectarian identity as a marker of political loyalty, are producing a cross-border sectarian struggle, with Iranian clients lined up against clients of Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Qatar.

This sectarian element is important, because it represents a built-in limit to Iranian potential. As a Shia power, Iran finds it difficult to gain legitimacy among Sunni Arabs or to successfully develop proxies outside of Shia Arab populations, as becomes apparent when taking a closer look at Iran's main commitments in the region.

## The Pattern of Iranian Success and Failure

When assessing Iran's position in the main countries in which it is engaged, an emergent pattern presents itself.

### *Syria*

In Syria, Iran has been determined, since the outbreak of the uprising against the Assad dictatorship in March 2011, to preserve the dictator's rule. Iran and Syria have formal relations of military alliance dating back to 1982. Iranian financial assistance, mobilisation of regional proxies, help in military organisation and now direct provision of military personnel to Assad have been vital in preventing his downfall.

Has the intervention in Syria been a success for Iran and its methods of outreach? Partially, as Assad still controls Damascus. However, he rules over only about 20 per cent of the entire territory of Syria. There are no prospects of the reconquest of the greater part of the areas lost any time soon. Iran's efforts may

have kept the dictator in his seat, but the result has not been a return to repressive stability, but rather the effective collapse and de facto partition of Syria, with Assad reduced to the status of a single warlord among others, rather than the ruler of a country. This remains the case despite the relative recovery of Assad's fortunes as a result of the Russian intervention after September 30, 2015.

It is noteworthy that despite Iranian assistance, the direction of the Syrian Civil War appeared to be turning decisively against Assad in the course of 2015. The intervention by Russia, beginning this past September, derived to a degree from the Russian perception that its current levels of support were not working and that if Assad was to be saved, a more direct involvement by Moscow was necessary. Reportedly, the Russian intervention was the direct result of a visit by Iranian Quds Force Commander General Qasem Soleimani to Moscow in July 2015 in which he impressed on Russian officials the increasingly desperate predicament faced by Assad.<sup>7</sup> If this was indeed the case, it is testimony to the limited efficacy of Iranian methods in the Syrian context.

### *Iraq*

Iraq has a Shia Arab majority, and a traditionally pro-Iranian party (Dawa) is currently in power. Iranian assistance to the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in the form of the organising of the Shia militias in the Popular Mobilisation (Hashed al-Shaabi) played a vital role in stopping the Islamic State (IS) advance eastwards in the summer of 2014. The most powerful of the militias are political as well as military organisations. While these militias are officially administered by the Popular Mobilisation Committee, in reality the most powerful of them are directly linked to Iran.

The Badr organisation, headed by Hadi al Ameri, and the Ktaeb Hezbollah, led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, are the strongest of these groups. Both Ameri and al-Muhandis are veteran pro-Iranian Shia Islamist activists, with long and verifiable links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (the latter fought on the Iranian side in the Iran-Iraq war). Both are linked to the IRGC's Quds Force and Qasem Soleimani through strong personal connections.

The Shia militias, as both political and military organisations, are the key instrument for Iran in Iraq. Through them, the Iranians are able to directly impact the policymaking process in the country. Yet it is also the case that Iraq remains effectively divided into three component parts; the government controlled area in the south, the Islamic State territory in the centre, and the Kurdish north.

Neither the Shia militias nor the Iraqi armed forces appear anywhere close to re-uniting the country, and it is difficult to see how they could do so, given their openly sectarian, Shia orientation. The Islamic State is now in eclipse in Iraq. But the actions of the Shia militias against Sunni civilians in the recent re-taking of Fallujah demonstrate the contradiction at the heart of Shia sectarianism in Iraq – it wishes neither to divide the country, nor to rule in an equitable way. As such, even in a future post-ISIS scenario, the growing power of Shia sectarian forces is likely to provoke a Sunni response and greater Kurdish separatism, rather than acquiescence to Shia ascendancy.

So in the Iraqi context, Iranian influence is deep, but the result of it is the fragmentation of Iraq, and the Iranian domination of one part of it, rather than the emergence of a strong Iran-aligned unitary Iraqi state.

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<sup>7</sup> Layla Bassam and Tom Perry, 'How Iranian General Plotted out Syrian Assault on Moscow,' Reuters, October 6, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com>

### *Lebanon*

In Lebanon, the success of Iranian methods of outreach and subversion are most clearly showcased. Hezbollah is the prototype of an Iranian created and supported political-military group. Established by the Revolutionary Guards in the early 1980s, Hezbollah has, since 1990, been the only non-governmental organisation permitted to maintain an armed wing in Lebanon (with the exception of Palestinian groups permitted to carry arms within refugee camps). In 2006, Hezbollah launched a war on Israel without seeking the consent of the official government of the country. In 2008, it crushed an attempt to impose the authority of the central government over some of its activities.

Hezbollah has played a vital role in the Syrian civil war as an ally of Iran. Its personnel are taking an active part in the fighting. Iran and Hezbollah have also sought to take advantage of the chaos in Syria to establish an additional front for operations against Israel just east of the Quneitra Crossing (facing the Golan Heights). So far this has not been successful. Israeli pre-emptive action to prevent this has included the killing of a number of senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and Hezbollah personnel on 19 January 2015.

No challenge to Hezbollah's military power is on the horizon, though the entry into Lebanon of approximately one million Syrian Sunni refugees since 2011 has undermined the notion of an emergent Shia demographic majority which underlay and deepened the organisation's strength. There is evidence of efforts to organise among the Sunnis by both Jabat al-Nusra and IS.

There are no physical restrictions on Hezbollah's freedom of action. But at the same time, the notion of emergent open Hezbollah rule replacing the Lebanese state, and implementing the Iranian system of government in the country is far-fetched. Hezbollah has neither the need nor the possibility of imposing such rule. Iran has implanted a powerful military machine along the border with Israel, giving itself a direct entry to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the ability to intervene to help other allies in need (Hezbollah has also involved in supporting pro-Iranian groups in Iraq, Yemen and the Palestinian territories in recent years.) But even in Lebanon, the site of Iran's greatest success, if Iran was hoping to produce a similar Shia Islamic regime to its own, this appears neither imminent nor likely.

As of now, also, as a result of its engagement in Syria, Hezbollah is at a low point in its fortunes. Iran and its proxies can at the present time neither win the fight in Syria nor abandon it. As a result, Hezbollah is haemorrhaging personnel in a war that remains far from over. The movement also appears to be responding with violence to attempts by Lebanese banks to implement US-mandated sanctions against it. On 12 June 2016, the headquarters of the Banque du Liban et Outre Mer (BLOM), located in the Verdun area of west Beirut, was targeted with an improvised explosive device (IED).<sup>8</sup> The details of the attack suggest that Hezbollah, rather than a Sunni jihadi group, was responsible. It is possible that the movement will succeed in intimidating the financial system against implementing sanctions. But this will come at the cost of further embittering the non-Shia and non-Hezbollah supporting section of the population against the movement.

### *Yemen*

In Yemen, the Iranian ally/client is the Ansar Allah organisation, more commonly known as the Houthis, after the name of the tribe which controls the organisation. The Houthis seized control of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, in September 2014. The government of President Abd-al Rabbo Mansour Hadi was

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<sup>8</sup> David Daoud, 'Hezbollah issued veiled warning prior to Beirut bank bombing,' Long War Journal, June 17, 2016. <http://www.longwarjournal.org>

forced into exile in Saudi Arabia. The Houthis and their allies then began a march to the south, intending to seize the Gulf of Aden and unite the country under their control.

Saudi and Emirati assistance to Yemeni government forces seeking to prevent this outcome began on 26 March, 2015. Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain also joined the coalition against the Houthis. The Houthis, having failed to take Aden City, agreed to adhere to a seven-point plan brokered by the UN at talks in Muscat, Oman. The plan included a ceasefire and the return of the government to Sana'a.

It was not implemented, and fighting resumed. A second ceasefire took effect on April 11, 2016. Peace talks in Kuwait are currently deadlocked. The Iranian backed element continue to dominate the north of the country but have failed to achieve what was undoubtedly Iran's main strategic goal in Yemen - namely securing control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This choke point between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea could have been used to halt the passage of shipping to the Suez Canal at a time of Teheran's choosing. But the Houthis did not reach it. Once again, we see the pattern of Iranian support resulting in division and renewed conflict, rather than outright victory for the Iranians.

### *Palestinians*

Iran maintains a strategic alliance of long standing with one Palestinian organisation - Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Islamic Jihad was founded in the Gaza Strip in 1981 by activists directly influenced by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. PIJ has remained a supporter of Iran and beneficiary of Iranian aid and support ever since.

Islamic Jihad, however, is a small organisation, with no serious ambitions for competing for the political leadership of the Palestinians. In the course of the 1990s, Iran sought to establish a strategic relationship with Hamas, largest and most powerful of Palestinian Islamist groups. This burgeoning relationship was disrupted, however, by the post-Arab Spring rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and then by the outbreak of civil war in Syria. Hamas, a Muslim Brotherhood linked group, sought to distance itself from the Iran-aligned Syrian regime, which was engaged in crushing a largely Sunni Arab revolt. The movement transferred its headquarters from Damascus. At the same time, Hamas sought to draw closer to what looked then to be an emergent Muslim Brotherhood regional bloc, centred on Egypt and Qatar.

In the event, no such bloc emerged. But it led to estrangement between Hamas and Iran. As of today, a split pertains in Hamas regarding future relations with Iran, with some elements supporting a return to alignment with the Iranians and others favouring alignment with Qatar and an attempt to repair relations with Saudi Arabia. Iran appears to have maintained relations with the Ktaeb al-Qassam, Hamas's military wing. It is clear that all Hamas elements favoring military struggle against Israel must naturally gravitate towards Iran, since its support represents the only viable military option.

During the period of the Second Intifada, the Iranians also maintained contacts with and support for armed elements within the rival Fatah movement. It is likely that these channels of communication and support still exist.

Iran has also sponsored the establishment of a proxy Hizballah style militia group in Gaza called al Sabirin, led by a former Islamic Jihad militant called Hisham Salem, though this movement remains small.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ehud Yaari, 'Iran's New proxy militia in Syria,' Foreign Affairs, September 28, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>

## Conclusion

The JCPOA has predictably not affected the pattern of destabilising Iranian regional behavior except to facilitate an intensification of Iran's existing strategy by making available greater funding for it as a result of sanctions relief. Iran seeks regional hegemony, an outcome which if achieved would be severely detrimental to Western security. However, the current 'scorecard' in the region suggests that Iranian interference and subversion in various regional contexts produces state fragmentation and continued conflict, rather than Iranian outright victory or the reconstitution of the area in question as an ally of Iran.

**CONTINUED REPRESSION:  
HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN SINCE  
THE NUCLEAR DEAL**

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**Tom Wilson**

In the time that has passed since the announcement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) a year ago, Iran has made no visible effort to ease repression, liberalise its theocratic social policies, or improve its human rights record. This is not surprising given that the nuclear agreement provided no material or meaningful incentives for Iran to change the nature of its conduct in the sphere of human rights and civil liberties. Indeed, in many respects the reverse is now the case. The easing of sanctions and the improvement of diplomatic and trading relations with the international community has significantly lifted any pressure on the regime to address these issues. Given that these moves have in many ways strengthened the regime's position it appears that Iran's leaders may in fact have judged that they now have a free hand to intensify repression at home, just as they have been emboldened to act more hawkishly abroad.

It is important to note that despite the fact that many in the West were readily willing to be enamoured by President Rouhani's rhetoric and as such hailed the new president as a moderate and a reformer accordingly, the human rights situation in Iran took a considerable turn for the worse following the start of Rouhani's presidency. Evidently the adoption and implementation of the JCPOA has done nothing to bring about a change in Rouhani's domestic policies, rather the same trends have continued unaltered by the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 countries.

Indeed, there has been a stark increase in almost every form of repression in Iran. For although Western leaders and diplomats were quick to champion Rouhani as a moderate, his presidency has seen a steady worsening of human rights. As the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center has noted, the rate of executions under Rouhani has measurably increased when compared to the record of his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, despite the fact that Ahmadinejad had a reputation for being far more extreme in his use of rhetoric.

Since Rouhani came to power as president in 2013 there have been more than 2,300 executions carried out in Iran.<sup>10</sup> As Amnesty International has documented, Iran is second only to China with regards to total number of executions. In spring of 2015 Ahmad Shaheed, the United Nations' special rapporteur on Iran, agreed with Amnesty International's claim that Iran had the most executions in the world. Shaheed also noted the ongoing concerns about egregious human rights violations in the Islamic Republic, particularly the increase in numbers of journalists imprisoned and other crackdowns on freedom of expression.<sup>11</sup>

Executions in Iran are carried out on a wide variety of grounds. Those executed range from political prisoners, to those accused of transgressing the regime's hardline attitudes to Sharia law. However, most death sentences issued in Iran come under drug related offences.<sup>12</sup> An indication of just how draconian the enforcement of Iranian anti-drug laws is came in February 2016 when it was reported that the entire adult male population of a single village was executed, allegedly for involvement in drug related offences.<sup>13</sup> Iran also has a particularly bad record on the execution of minors, with Amnesty International recording the execution of 73 juvenile offenders over the past decade.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sinclair, H., 'Iran: UK politicians demand harder line on country's human rights record', *International Business Times*, 12 February 2016, available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iran-uk-politicians-demand-harder-line-countrys-human-rights-record-1543585>, last visited: 08 July 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Agence France-Presse in Geneva, 'Iran's human rights situation worsening, says UN special rapporteur', *The Guardian*, 16 March 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/16/un-rapporteur-human-rights-situation-in-iran-worsening>, last visited 08 July 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Dehghan, S., 'Iran: seven key human rights challenges facing President Rouhani', *The Guardian*, 04 March 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/mar/04/iranian-election-seven-key-human-rights-challenges-facing-president-rouhani>, last visited 08 July 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Dehghan, S., 'Iran executed all adult men in one village for drug offences, official reveals', *The Guardian*, 26 February 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/26/all-adult-males-in-one-iranian-village-executed-for-drug-offences-official-says>, last visited 08 July 2016.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/01/irans-hypocrisy-exposed-as-scores-of-juvenile-offenders-condemned-to-gallows/>

A further serious point of concern regarding the prevalence of the death penalty in Iran relates specifically to judicial proceedings in Iran, including court issued death sentences. Iranian court proceedings have long been widely condemned as not meeting the basic standards required for a fair trial. There is a clear lack of due process afforded to those convicted, with abuses often worst where charges have a political dimension.

Indeed, as we have seen in recent years in Iran, the regime has become even more aggressively authoritarian in the way in which it is prepared to crackdown on internal opposition. Unfortunately, the JCPOA has had absolutely no discernible effect on reducing the severity of the regime's conduct in this area. Rather, we have seen Iran's government specifically target individuals for arrest in what would appear to be an attempt to demonstrate a show of strength after being obliged to make concessions as part of the nuclear agreement. Furthermore, some of the increasing draconian behaviour could be viewed as an attempt to counteract the perceived threat of westernisation that hardliners in Iran feared would result from increased trade and improved relations with the international community.

Those who seek to challenge the regime at the political level continue to be repressed viciously. While the international media hailed the Islamic Republic's February elections as a victory for moderates and reformers, almost all of those genuinely committed to reforming in the system in Iran are now imprisoned or have fled the country. Many Iranian dissidents have raised the alarm on the deterioration of the human rights situation in Iran under Rouhani and observed the continuation of this trend following the announcement of the agreement with Iran. Senior opposition figures have been put under house arrest, including all three of Iran's leading opposition politicians. The notion that Iran's recent elections represent a triumph for the forces of moderation struggles to stand in the face of this behaviour.

Among the prominent political prisoners who have been imprisoned in Iran is Narges Mohammadi, who in addition to being a journalist is also a key figure for the human rights campaign group *The Centre for Human Rights Defenders*.<sup>15</sup> Others, such as opposition activist Farzad Madadzadeh, have reported on the worsening conditions in Iranian prisons since Rouhani took office, compounded by the increase in the numbers of political prisoners since 2013.<sup>16</sup> Madadzadeh has recounted the terrible conditions he experienced in prison, including regular beatings, periods of being blindfolded, interrogation that would last for 15 hours each day, as well as four months of solitary confinement.<sup>17</sup>

Along with political activists, journalists also remain in the regime's line of fire. In December 2015 the Committee to Protect Journalists released a report detailing that after China and Egypt, more journalists are now imprisoned in Iran than any country.<sup>18</sup> Reporters Without Borders have similarly said that as of March there are a total of 37 journalists currently detained in Iran, making Iran one of the world's five worst states for the imprisonment of members of the press. This figure represents a steep increase in the number of journalists imprisoned, given that in the previous December that figure was recorded as 19. The 2016 press freedom index also ranks Iran 169 out of 180 countries monitored worldwide.<sup>19</sup> On a scale where 100 is the worst possible score a country can receive, Reporters Without Borders gave Iran a score of 66.52 for press freedom.

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<sup>15</sup> Associated Press in Dubai, 'Iranian rights activist Narges Mohammadi arrested in Tehran', *The Guardian*, 06 May 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/06/iranian-rights-activist-narges-mohammadi-arrested-in-tehran>, last visited: 08 July 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Vinocur, N., 'Iranian dissidents warn human rights worse under Rouhani', *Politico*, 10 October 2015, available at: <http://www.politico.eu/article/iranian-dissidents-human-rights-worse-rouhani/>, last visited 08 July 2016.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> '2015 prison census: 199 journalists jailed worldwide', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, as of 01 December 2015, available at: <https://cpj.org/imprisoned/2015.php>, last visited: 08 July 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Dehghan, S., 'Iran: seven key human rights challenges facing President Rouhani', *The Guardian*, 04 March 2016.

In addition to the persecution of journalists and political activists, the Islamic Republic continues to target various religious minorities within the country, with members of the Baha'i community targeted for the worst repression - all seven of that community's religious leaders are currently imprisoned, each sentenced to 20 year jail terms.<sup>20</sup> Ever since its establishment, the Islamic Republic has acted to impose the Ayatollahs' interpretation of Islamic law on the entire population, including by force where necessary. Since the agreement of the JCPOA a number of indications that hardliners in Iran are now seeking to increase the degree of authoritarianism that the state uses to enforce Islamic observances are observable. As of April of this year, Iranian authorities established a new unit to ensure the enforcement of the regime's illiberal social restrictions, with some 7000 such agents being deployed across Tehran alone.<sup>21</sup>

These 'morality police' units are tasked with reporting those not adhering to the Islamic Republic's conservative dress codes and in particular will target women not conforming to state regulations on the appropriate head covering.<sup>22</sup> They operate in places such as shopping malls and public spaces, in plainclothes so as to allow themselves to spy on Iranians more effectively. As part of this renewed push to implement illiberal social practices, the authorities are also going to greater lengths to enforce such laws as those banning women from sports stadiums.<sup>23</sup> Even something as simple as walking dogs is prohibited as part of the crackdown on western and un-Islamic practices. In 2014 (after Rouhani had taken office) new laws were passed to make the punishment for such offences more severe, with the sentence for dog walking increased to 74 lashes.<sup>24</sup>

The severity of the worsening human rights situation since Rouhani became president and since the signing of the nuclear agreement has in recent months received international attention. In February 2016 some 200 British MPs and peers signed a letter urging the UK government to make the improvement of relations with Iran contingent upon the Islamic Republic actively improving its human rights record.<sup>25</sup> Of course, the JCPOA had always dealt with the nuclear issues exclusively and had never been conceived as addressing any aspect of Iran's internal governance. As such, it was always a tenuous claim that the nuclear agreement would be a step toward moderation on the part of the regime in Tehran.

For those who did not go as far as to suggest that the deal would have a profoundly transformative impact upon the fundamentally theocratic nature of the system in Iran, there were many who claimed that the agreement would strengthen the position of Rouhani; who in the prevailing narrative is a reformer and potential ally of the West. Even if it were true that Rouhani is at heart a moderate, the notion that strengthening his position would bring about significant liberalisation within Iran is baseless. Such a reading of the situation in Iran fails to account for the central role of the Supreme Leader. Indeed, Iran's growing army of morality police are under the control of Ayatollah Khamenei.

Following the agreement of the JCPOA, the public relations and diplomatic benefits for Iran began to materialise rapidly. A little more than a month after the agreement was secured, Britain reopened its Embassy in Tehran, while in January President Rouhani travelled to Italy for high level trade talks. Yet those who expected this nuclear agreement to have a transformative effect upon the regime's conduct either at home or abroad were always going to be disappointed. The faction within the Iranian government

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Dehghan, S., 'Influx of morality police to patrol the streets of Tehran', *The Guardian*, 20 April 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/20/influx-of-morality-police-to-patrol-the-streets-of-tehran>, last visited: 08 July 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Braunschweiger, A., 'Banned from Stadiums for Being a Woman in Iran', *Human Rights Watch*, 30 June 2016, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/30/banned-stadiums-being-woman-iran>, last visited: 08 July 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Iaccino, L., 'Iran: Dog Owners to be Lashed 74 Times in New National Ban', *International Business Times*, 07 November 2014, available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iran-dog-owners-be-lashed-74-times-new-national-ban-1473709>, last visited: 08 July 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Sinclair, H., 'Iran: UK politicians demand harder line on country's human rights record', *International Business Times*, 12 February 2016.

that accepted the American offer of a deal were pragmatists, but never the moderates that many in the West were eager to believe them to be. As such, for Iran this agreement was never supposed to be transformative, but merely transactional. The transaction in question was never intended to change the fundamental nature of the regime, nor the regime's fundamental outlook when it came to relating to the region, international community and particularly America, Britain, Israel and the West. The transaction was about strengthening the regime's present position so as to allow Iran's leaders to press ahead with the objectives set out by the Islamic Revolution. That is what the regime is now doing, and as the Islamic Republic continues to be strengthened economically and secured strategically, it is no surprise to see that it is also emboldened domestically and geopolitically.

Cumulatively Iran's repressive measures point to how, far from being on the path to moderation, since Rouhani came to office the regime has only continued to become increasingly hardline, and the agreement of the nuclear deal has done nothing to reverse this trend. Rather it would appear that over the course of the last year matters have worsened. Iran remains entirely hostile in how it deals with foreign powers and approaches regional security, just as it is still entirely repressive in its dealings with its own people.

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